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## AUSONIUS, THE POET OF THE TRANSITION

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In the early spring-time, before the winter snows have wholly vanished, there sometimes come days which seem to belong both to the winter and to the spring—days with all the chill and bluster of winter, with scudding clouds, bare fields, and leafless trees, and yet with an elusive premonition also of the coming spring, a sudden balminess, the song of the first returning robin, perhaps even a venturesome daffodil. Such days warn us that winter is not yet over, but they stimulate the imagination to the anticipation of a glorious June.

Even so in the evolution of man, while each generation must of course possess certain elements which belong to the past and other new ones which anticipate the future, still there are epochs in which this double character is more obvious than in others, epochs in which men are evidently loath to part with the old, and yet restless with half-comprehended aspiration for the new. The essential meaning of these transition periods is the easier to read when embodied in poem and story, the work of some man pre-eminently the child of his epoch and gifted to express in literary form its traditions and its hopes.

Such an age was that in which Decimus Magnus Ausonius lived, and he is its best interpreter. It was the fourth century of our era, the time of the pagan Emperor Julian and the Christian Theodosius, the epoch which witnessed the final triumph of Christianity over heathenism and the settlement of the Goths within the Roman empire—two events of tremendous portent for the civilized world. The men of this century idolized ancient Rome. They took the great writers of the Golden Age as their models, and echoed the thoughts, the sentiments, the language of Cicero and Vergil. Their manner of life, their pleasures, their occupations, are largely those of the early Empire. But we perceive a subtle difference. These fourth-century

<sup>1</sup> The metrical versions in this article are from the pen of Mrs. Helena H. Edwards. In making some of them the translator has condensed a little the matter of the original.

Romans are more human, perhaps I should say more modern, than their classical predecessors. In their religious ideas, in their outlook upon nature, in their attitude toward life, they are no longer wholly ancient but a mixture of ancient and modern, often with the modern element predominating. This Janus-quality of the age is faithfully reflected in its greatest poet.

Decimus Magnus Ausonius was born about 310 A. D. in Burdigala, the modern Bordeaux, in Aquitaine. His father was a physician, a man of good education, not fluent in Latin but a fine Greek scholar, possessing a moderate property, a member of the municipal senate, and afterward associated with his son in high office under the Empire. The poet was brought up by his maternal grandmother, of whom he speaks affectionately, but adds: "*ad perpendicularum seque suosque habuit*"—"she made us toe the mark." The grandfather was an Aeduan of noble birth, whose family, espousing the cause of the wrong candidate for the purple in the time of the Thirty Tyrants, had lost all their property and been compelled to flee from their ancestral home. The poet himself was for many years professor of rhetoric in the University of Burdigala, an institution of high repute throughout the Roman world. About 364 the emperor Valentinian chose him to be tutor of his son Gratian, and when the latter came to the throne as emperor he rewarded his faithful teacher with high honors—in 378 the prefecture of Gaul and Africa, and in 379 the consulship. Ausonius spent his last days in his native Burdigala, occupied in various literary pursuits. He died about 395.

Many elements combined in the life of Ausonius to qualify him in extraordinary degree as the interpreter of his age. He was highly educated and possessed sufficient wealth; he mingled easily in all circles of society; he was in close touch with both sides in the great religious controversy of the day, being the intimate friend both of the Christian monk Paulinus and of the pagan controversialist Symmachus. He enjoyed the friendship and confidence of the emperors Valentinian, Gratian, and Theodosius. He traveled widely, was a man of affairs as well as a scholar, and filled with credit governmental positions of the first importance. Without being a great poet, he possessed considerable poetical ability, and he liked to write. He seems to have been interested in everything about him, the simplest

happenings as well as those the world calls great. As a result we obtain from his writings a remarkably vivid picture of the men of his time and their manner of life. It is true that his is a literary style, sometimes pedantic and stilted, modeled after the great writers of Rome—and sometimes a long way after. Still he is often delightfully naïve, as for example in the poem addressed to his grandson (*Idyll.* iv), of which he says: “Ego haec annis illius magis quam meis scripsi, aut fortasse et meis. Δὲς παῖδες οἱ γέροντες.” As you read his poems the conviction grows that the author is sincere, that he is a man of sound feeling and good heart, that he is on the whole a pretty good citizen and a good man to know.

Ausonius' Latinity is remarkably pure, considering his age. This is undoubtedly owing in large measure to the conservative influence of the schools. The interval of time between Cicero and Ausonius, four centuries, is about the same as that which separates Chaucer and Wordsworth, but the differences of grammar and language between the two Latin writers are as nothing compared with those existing between the two Englishmen. The unapproachable supremacy of the republican and Augustan literature seems to have determined the form of literary Latin for all time and to have rendered any considerable variation impossible. So the language of Ausonius is in the main the language of Cicero and Vergil, in vocabulary, in syntax, and even in cadence. For in Ausonius is still heard the sonorous march of the Latin period, so different from the staccato movement of the Christian hymns. But occasionally one finds a strange word or a peculiar construction, and it may be of interest to note some of them here.

Three times I have found him using in the indirect discourse *quod* with a finite mode, just like the English clause with “that.” In *Epist.* ii. 2-4 and xxviii. 1, 2 he uses the subjunctive, but in *Profess.* ii. 13, 14, the indicative. This construction, which every beginner in Latin would condemn, occurs in isolated instances in archaic and even in classical Latin, and grows more frequent as the Christian centuries go by, until it becomes common in the Middle Ages. The indicative in an indirect question, common in Plautus and Terence, occurs at least once in Ausonius (*Epit. Her.* 38. 1). I have noted several instances of the perfect infinitive used for the present (e. g., *sumpsisse*,

*Actio* 77; *relegisse, Praef. Epiced.*), also not uncommon in early Latin. In fact many forms which were common in archaic Latin but were avoided by the classical writers seem to have persisted through the centuries on the lips of the common people and thence to have found their way into literature again in post-Augustan times.

Ausonius' verse is full of Plautine and Vergilian echoes. In fact, Teuffel declares that, though a professed Christian, Ausonius knows his Vergil better than his Bible. He has one poem of over a hundred lines made up wholly of phrases and verses from Vergil ingeniously pieced together so as to give the words a meaning Vergil never intended—an extraordinary instance of ingenuity worse than wasted. He is, moreover, fond of artificial and involved forms of speech. This weakness he himself satirizes when, sending some of his verses to a friend, he says: "*Nescis, puto, quid velim tot versibus dicere. Medius fidius neque bene ipse intellego*"—"You don't know, I suppose, what I am trying to say in all these verses. By heaven, I am not sure that I know myself." But when he forgets the rhetorician and the professor in the man his language is simple and direct and his sentiment sound. Hear for example his poem in commemoration of his wife, written thirty-six years after her death:

A silence greets me everywhere,  
The empty bed, the vacant chair;  
No one my joys and griefs to share,  
Since thou art gone.

Time brings surcease of pain and tears  
To other mourners, but naught cheers  
The sadness of my lonely years  
Without thee, dear.

Because thou wert so good and true  
Thy virtues I recount anew;  
All other goodness but shines through  
My thought of thee.

So also in other poems, the *Mosella*, to which I shall return later, the lines to his father and to his mother, the poem addressed to his grandson—perfectly natural feeling finds natural utterance and appeals irresistibly across the centuries to our sympathies.

Ausonius was a professed Christian, as many passages in his writ-

ings attest, and his pupil, the future emperor Gratian, grew up to be devout, even fanatical in the new faith. But Ausonius' grasp of Christian truth was not profound nor did the new religion much modify his thinking. He remains a good deal of a pagan in spite of his *Easter Hymn* and *Morning Prayer*. He was, as I have said, the child of his age. It was a transition epoch in religion. The weight of the government was cast on the side of the Galilean, but the gods of Olympus still had a firm hold on the hearts and the imaginations of men. St. Augustine's *City of God* is a monument of the fierce debate which raged between the adherents of the rival faiths. In the calamities which Rome suffered in those days, especially at the hands of the northern barbarians, each side found evidence that Heaven was punishing the Empire for the sins of their opponents. The Roman world was of course moving toward Christianity, and before the end of the fourth century this movement had progressed so far that the celebration of pagan rites was then forbidden by law. But even then there were multitudes, especially outside the cities, who still clung to the old religion. Nay, more than a century later, Boethius, minister of Theodoric the Great, writes his five books on the *Consolation of Philosophy* without a reference in the whole work to Christianity or Christian doctrine. We can therefore understand the superficiality of Ausonius' faith, nor are we surprised when we fail to find any distinctively Christian sentiment in those poems which are the truest expression of his deepest emotions—those addressed to his father, his mother, and his wife. He has a very hazy conception of certain fundamental doctrines of the church, such as the Trinity, and the immortality of the soul. But his poems on Christian subjects are of great interest from the literary point of view, for they show how powerfully the language of the Bible modified his style. His *Morning Prayer* is intensely Hebraistic. The movement of the phrases is abrupt and irregular and the language and imagery are borrowed almost exclusively from Scripture. Listen to a few lines:

O thou Almighty, known to me only through my heart's worship, thou whom the wicked know not but who art not unknown to the pious; without beginning or end; more ancient than time which was or which shall be; whose form and measure nor mind can comprehend nor tongue can tell; whom he alone may behold . . . he the creator of all things, himself the cause of creation, the Word

of God, the divine Word, who was before the world which he was to create; begotten in that time when time as yet was not; brought forth before the sun and the ruddy morning star lightened the sky; without whom nothing was created, by whom all things were made; whose throne is in the heavens; to whom, sitting on his throne, the earth is subjected, and the sea, and the impenetrable abyss of gloomy night; ever active, moving all things, quickening what else were dead.

Ausonius' literary range is not great. In prose, besides brief passages interspersed among his metrical compositions, we have only the speech of thanks to the emperor Gratian for having made him consul. In verse we have a great many mediocre epigrams, many idyls and metrical epistles to various friends, the *Parentalia*, a collection of short poems each descriptive of a relative of the poet, and a similar collection of poems descriptive of fellow-professors. Whatever poetic value these various compositions may or may not have, they contain a great deal of information about the customs and institutions of those days. This information, conveyed incidentally, often in mere hints, is always interesting, even when on most trivial matters. For instance, we learn from the *Ephemeris* that the cook was accustomed to test the flavoring of a dish by thrusting his finger first into it and then into his mouth. When about to give a dinner-party, the host is not content with sending out his invitations in advance. Like the king in the New Testament, as the hour approaches he bids his servant go and remind his guests that they are to dine with him. The third idyl describes the poet's villa near Burdigala. The sixth tells of a beautiful wall-painting of Cupid punished by love-sick maidens, a picture the poet had seen in one of those elaborately constructed baths which he describes for us, situated on the banks of the Moselle and constituting a second Baiae. Elsewhere he tells us of grist-mills driven by water-power, and of machines operated by the same power for sawing up blocks of marble. I may here add that further evidence of the familiarity of the Romans with these mechanical devices is found in other Latin authors. Cato speaks of *rotae aquariae*, and Pliny (*Nat. Hist.* 18. 23) of *rotae quas aqua versat obiter*—perhaps wheels for lifting water from the river into irrigation ditches. Elsewhere (36. 9) Pliny describes at length the process of cutting marble and other stone into thin slabs by means of saws with fine sand to increase the friction; and Vitruvius (ii. 7) speaks of *tofus qui etiam serra dentata, uti lignum, secatur*.

Ausonius' most famous poem is the *Mosella*, an idyl of about 450 hexameter verses. It is a glowing description of the Moselle River, and was occasioned by a trip the poet took from Bingen-on-the-Rhine across the hills to the Moselle and then up the river to Trier, the "Augusta Trevirorum" of his day. We are accustomed to think of the Rhine as the military frontier against barbarism, but nothing in this poem justifies such a view. The poet pictures for us here a busy, contented, and prosperous population and a landscape of waving grain and odorous vineyards, dotted over with luxurious villas and country homes, possessing at least one city, Augusta Trevirorum, of imperial rank in wealth and political importance. It is a lovely scene of peace and industry and plenty, comparable, says the enthusiastic poet, only to his own fair Aquitaine. But this sense of absolute security which pervades the poem has also its pathetic side. For we cannot but remember that as "Linden saw another sight when the drums beat at dead of night," so also the Moselle had known and was soon to know again the devastation wrought by war. We need look only a few years into the future to see these fertile hillsides and lovely vales ravaged by wild Vandal hordes. But in the poem there is no suspicion of this impending whirlwind of rapine and slaughter, and we cannot but be thankful that these dread coming events cast no shadow on the smiling picture the poet shows us.

A remarkable element in the poem which must strike even the casual reader as most unusual, nay, as absolutely unique in Latin literature, is the truly modern love of nature which pervades it. To the average Roman of classical times nature presented herself usually in the aspect of an obstacle to be mastered. He had little appreciation of her beauties. He found no hidden meaning, no commentary on human life, in the world about him. In the sighing forest and the whispering brook he seems never to have heard the "still, sad music of humanity." The quiet of a country retreat was indeed a relief after the bustle and turmoil of Rome, but even in Catullus' *Sirmio* and Vergil's *Eclogues* we look in vain for any recognition of the profounder appeal which nature today makes to the responsive soul. But Ausonius loves nature like a modern. In him romanticism has its beginning, and Mackail truly calls him the earliest French poet. Let me give a striking illustration of this quality from



Epistle xxv, vss. 9 ff. Ausonius is here expostulating with his friend and former pupil, Paulinus, who, having turned his back on the world and taken the monastic vow, refuses even to answer the poet's frequent letters. This, says the poet, is contrary to nature, which has given to all things a voice.

There are voices in the ocean  
 In its wild, tempestuous roar,  
 For they cry out and are echoed  
 From the cliffs along the shore.

There is music in the zephyr  
 As it sighs among the trees;  
 And the hedge-rows of Mount Hybla  
 Murmur with unnumbered bees.

There's a story that the brooks  
 Are ever whispering as they flow,  
 Set to music by the reeds  
 Upon the banks of long ago.

Nature has made nothing silent,  
 Neither serpent, beast, nor bird;  
 Art thou only dumb, Paulinus,  
 That thou answerest not a word?

This is wholly in the spirit of that most modern of poems, Shelley's "Love's Philosophy":

The fountains mingle with the river  
 And the rivers with the ocean,  
 The winds of heaven mix forever  
 With a sweet emotion;  
 Nothing in this world is single,  
 All things by a law divine  
 In one another's being mingle—  
 Why not I with thine?

See the mountains kiss high heaven  
 And the waves clasp one another;  
 No sister-flower would be forgiven  
 If it disdained its brother;  
 And the sunlight clasps the earth  
 And the moonbeams kiss the sea—  
 What are all these kissings worth,  
 If thou kiss not me?

But let us give the *Mosella* the more detailed examination which it fully deserves. It betrays throughout, as I have said, an ardent love of nature both for its own sake and also as the environment of human life. It abounds in descriptive passages like the following, in which the poet revels in each detail of the lovely picture:

Hail! river Mosella, the pride of the Belgians,  
 To whom thou hast given a city most fair;  
 Green are thy banks with rich grass covered over,  
 Fragrant thy hills with the vine growing there.  
 Here lies the shore in whose firm, sandy stretches  
 Lingers no print of the foot; and below  
 Through the green light on the wave-furrowed bottom  
 Clearly the long, crinkly ripple-marks show.  
 For in thy pure shining depths are no secrets  
 As peacefully, joyfully, on thou dost flow;  
 Now like a sea bearing ships on thy bosom;  
 Then dashing headlong a wild mountain stream;  
 Now like a lake through whose clear shining surface  
 Half hidden by moss the bright pebbles gleam.  
 Close to the shore where the current is gentle,  
 Bending and swaying, tall water-plants grow;  
 While in and out glide the quick-darting fishes—  
 Through bright rippling waters their shining scales glow.

Or again, vss. 192 ff.:

Low in the west hangs the sun in his splendor;  
 Hesperus brightens as night-shadows fall;  
 The bank seems to float in a glory of color  
 That widens and deepens and spreads over all.  
 Clustering grapes from the hillside reflected  
 Swell on the tide and so temptingly lie,  
 The boatman confuses the real with the seeming,  
 As he floats in his skiff hung between sea and sky.

The introduction of a human touch, as in this last passage, is characteristic of Ausonius. In vs. 208 we see the vine-dresser forgetful of his work and the flight of time as he watches the swift boats passing and repassing below; and in vs. 166 hill, forest, and river re-echo to the badinage of boatman on the river and peasant on the hillside as they vent their rustic wit on each other. Elsewhere the

poet tells us of boys swimming in the cool water, and of fishermen plying their vocation with net and rod. And in vss. 170 ff. we have a pretty picture of Naiads venturing forth to sport in the leafy vineyards, whence they are put to flight by a troop of mischievous Fauns. And so the poem proceeds from one lovely scene to another, therein imitating the river which it commemorates.

Four centuries separate Ausonius from the classical period, and the interval between his day and our own is still greater. Nevertheless I think this brief study has shown that his spirit is not wholly alien either to republican Rome or modern America. He has points of vital contact with both. Though he was born of Gallic parentage and in a time of decadence, he has abundantly proven his right to be listed among the poets of Rome. And yet he belongs to us, too, for he often sets vibrating in our hearts chords which no other Roman can waken.